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ABSTRACT

Use of the vignette as a tool in qualitative educational research is relatively new. Vignettes were used to capture the nuances of the work of teacher specialists in the New York City (New York) Teacher Centers. The teacher specialists had shared with evaluators their belief that despite a deserved reputation for effective work, they had a sense of doubt about actual impact. Qualitative instruments to keep track of activity and case studies enabled evaluators to understand the dynamics of the teacher specialists' work. In addition, vignettes were created as tools for revealing subtleties not apparent to an outside evaluator. The vignettes contained a series of topics designed to get at the way the specialist actually worked. Each vignette was six to ten pages in length. The outline covered eight mutually determined questions. Examples of two vignettes are in the text of the paper. A total of 16 vignettes were written. They revealed the quality of the specialists' work and provided a viable source of data on the impact of their work. The two vignettes included describe: (1) an intervention to assist a beginning teacher; and (2) successful efforts to involve an experienced teacher in supporting learning centers. It was concluded that the vignette appears to hold real promise as a tool for collecting qualitative data. (MDE)

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DOCUMENTING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE:

THE VIGNETTE AS A QUALITATIVE TOOL

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Documenting Professional Practice:

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For a long time we have known that much craft learning by teachers about teaching takes place as teachers work alone with students in their class. (Lieberman and Miller, 1984, Lortie, 1975). We have also known that some of this learning gets passed on to other teachers informally. Teachers meet at the rexograph machine, swap materials in the Teachers Room, and have other casual contact. Much of this, however, goes undocumented and is inaccessible to the profession at large.

The same kind of experiential learning seems to be taking place today as new and/or reshaped roles for teachers proliferate in schools during this second wave of educational reform. (Porter, 1986, Hatfield, et. al, n.d.) The past several decades of school improvement programs have added new dimensions to the ways in which school personnel work to facilitate constructive change (Little, 1986 , Huberman and Miles, 1986, McLaughlin, 1984), but, although a whole new literature on the process of change has grown up, these new roles for teachers are only beginning to be written about. (The principal of a school has often been seen as the focus for the success of these programs, but our concern here is for the teachers in leadership roles in schools, who have often been responsible for the success of school improvement programs as well.) The learnings of these new teacher leaders about the every day happenings in schools, the changed relationships over time, the new sense of self and feelings of enhanced self esteem held by teachers, and the organizational learning of the school community as a whole, have yet to be documented in any systematic way. These too, have been mainly experiential, accrued over time and shared informally, if at all.

Evaluation Research: An Opportunity for Knowledge Building

During 1985-86, we had an opportunity to work on an evaluation report for the New York City Teacher Centers Consortium (Miles et.al, 1986). We had previously worked on a research study during 1983-85 documenting the core skills of three school improvement programs in New York City. (See Miles, Saxl, Lieberman, 1987). While completing the study, we were asked to participate with the Consortium , one of the groups we had studied.

For the eight years previous to our evaluation, the United Federation of Teachers had organized Teacher Centers in schools in New York City under the leadership of Myrna Cooper. Each of these Centers was run by a Teacher Specialist (a teacher leader who worked full time in the Center). They already had a reputation for successful work with teachers in a variety of improvement efforts - working on a one to one basis, with groups and, increasingly, on the district level as well. But there were always the nagging questions : ' What is the real impact of our work? We know we are doing good work, but how do we talk about it to others?' It was to answer these questions that we set out to work with the Consortium.

Although we helped them to design instruments so that they could keep track of what they were doing on a daily basis, somehow, the specialists felt, the nuances of what they were most proud of slipped between the cracks. Faced with this frustration, we decided to do case studies of several of the specialists so that we could see them at work in their schools, talk to people who were effected by their services and generally try to understand, in a more dynamic way, what they were doing. (Saxl and James, 1987) But doing case studies on all the specialists was impossible. There were too many people to study and limited resources to study them.

Even if we could have done them, case studies in themselves would not have given us many of their complex interactions, their inner feelings and thoughts or how their accumulated efforts made a difference over time. What we needed was to find or invent some other means to get at what was obviously a much more complicated set of dynamics. The qualitative means at our disposal was not doing enough.

Working with the project director and a small group of specialists, we designed a tool that we named a "vignette". We piloted it for a year and, finding it viable, used it in the following manner. Each of the three specialists, who were already the subjects of case studies, would write three vignettes per person for the year. These would complement the in-depth case studies we were doing, thus helping to provide a fuller picture of their work. We would also have several other specialists write vignettes as well. In this way, we would have sixteen vignettes in all, of different specialists' working with teachers in a variety of contexts and situations - hopefully giving us a closer look at the impact of their work. We were looking for impact on three levels: the individual teacher, the school and the district.

The Vignette

The vignette consisted of a series of topics designed to get at the way the specialist actually worked. We reasoned that if it was too unnatural and too restrictive it would be hard to write, so we asked the specialists to write about a situation where they felt they had worked successfully with a teacher over a time period of no longer than a few months. We designed the topics collaboratively so that they would flow, almost as if they were stories to be told informally to a friend. After they wrote the vignettes and sent them to us we then read them and raised questions about areas that needed further clarification. Sometimes there were provocative sentences, but not enough detail to know exactly what had

happened. Sometimes the detail was rich, but needed better organization. Where possible, the vignettes were sent back to the specialists for rewriting or, if that could not be arranged, we made our comments on the telephone - each of us with a copy in our hands. Where necessary we edited and/or added the new details they gave us, and then went back to get their final approval that the vignette accurately represented "their story". Each vignette was approximately six to ten pages in length. The outline, that we created together, included the following questions or topics:

Outline of the Vignette

* The Context - Tell a little about the context of your school.
* Your Hopes - What did you hope would happen?
* Who was involved? - Were you working with one person, a group, the whole school?
* What I did - What were the specifics of your work?
* What happened? - What was the reaction or results of the work?
* The Impact - What happened in a larger sense, to the person, to other teachers, etc.
* Why did it happen? - What were the reasons for the impact?
* Other comments - Anything else of importance.

The vignettes that were written represented a broad array of the types of interventions made by the specialists: the different strategies for working with new and experienced teachers, new ways of developing collegiality, introduction of new curricular initiatives, expanding a teacher's pedagogical repertoire , developing the Teacher Center as the focus for professional activity and much more. The complexity of the work of the specialist, illustrated through the format of the vignette - a narrative that was both personal and professional- produced a rich source of documented craft knowledge. It is a good example of collaboration:

written by the people doing the work, aided by those of us engaged in trying to find ways to both understand and order an untidy world.

Two Examples of Vignettes*

Two examples of specialists working in elementary schools give the flavor of the context of this large urban center, the labor intensive work of the specialist and the different strategies used when working with a new and an experienced teacher. They also give us a view of the tenaciousness, persistence and caring of the helpers and the age old, hard rock problems of changing a profession resistant to change.

Lack of Experience - Self Doubt - A Vicious Cycle

Parkview school was the "showcase" school in this particular district. It was in a district that had changed from Italian and Jewish to a Black and Hispanic population. There were approximately 1300 students in this elementary school. Because it had a good reputation in the district, many parents wanted to send their children there. (They found ways that were not always legal.) As a result, the school was suffering serious overcrowding. Both new and experienced teachers were happy to come to this school as they felt that they would be in a very supportive environment. However, new teachers were usually quickly overwhelmed by the burden of high expectations placed on them, and self doubt often plagued teachers new to the school. A group of new teachers had just come here, as this school, like others in the area, was beginning to suffer a teacher shortage.

The specialist, in this situation, wanted to help a new teacher who was having trouble, by working with her in the classroom while linking her to a support group of other new teachers as well.

* Both of these vignettes have been summarized.

Who was involved

Louise, the focus of her work, was unmarried, in her mid thirties and, up until then, had pursued a career in opera. She was soft spoken and very gentle and, although she lived in the area, was clearly not "street wise".

She had been receiving "administrative" support, by way of cluster teachers (specialists in subject areas) and paraprofessionals coming into her classroom to model classroom management techniques or "keep order". Louise often left the school in tears and eventually became ill, questioning whether she could ever "make it" as a teacher.

What She Did

The specialist described the chain of events as she worked with this teacher. At first she had an "informal" lunch with her and other first grade teachers who had been in the school for a year. This led to her visiting the class. (Although Louise asked the specialist to tell her what was wrong, she was hoping for some positive feedback as well.) The specialist and Louise made a list together that included her strong points as well as where they thought improvement was needed. Over the course of a year, the specialist involved her in meetings, went to her class several times, modelled behavior , followed up, encouraged her, in short, helped her to survive in the classroom. She convinced Louise to participate in an institute during the summer where she would be exposed to behavioral and instructional management skills. The specialist and Louise met privately to write a list of rules, organize needed routines, arrange the furniture, etc. For the first few months of the semester they continued to meet and Louise continued to need, and receive, reinforcement and practice in behavioral management.

The specialist sought to accomplish her goal of building up Louise's feelings of self-esteem (badly jeopardized by nagging doubts that she

would ever be able to teach) by working with her on classroom management as well as familiarizing her with the graded curriculum. She provided her with strategies to tie lessons together, and to keep them moving at a pace that would help insure student participation.

Why It Happened This Way

Louise was able to grow professionally because she had come to teaching with a strong commitment and realized, early in her career, that she needed help. She was willing to listen, learn, adopt and adapt strategies to use in her classroom. The specialist, for her part, knew how to work with Louise to develop her sense of self, as well as to increase her knowledge of the content and process of working in a classroom. She created, in addition, a support group for Louise and other new teachers - an innovation in that school - so that they would be able to to continue to learn from and help each other.

Reading this, we were reminded, once again, of the assault on one's sense of self that takes place during the first year of teaching; but we were also able to see a long term strategy that a teacher leader could use to help a new teacher survive and grow.

Introducing Learning Centers to Experienced Teachers

In this vignette, the specialist described her school as a large elementary school with more than 1500 students who, as a whole, had low test scores. The faculty was characterized as having two factions who rarely communicated with one another. The majority of teachers used whole class teaching methods with few provisions for looking at differences among students. The District had suggested the use of Learning Centers but few of the teachers had tried them. Most were resistant claiming that they wouldn't work in their classrooms. The specialist, in this case, was an expert in the use of Learning Centers.

Who was involved.

Her short term goal was to re-introduce the idea of using Learning Centers in the first grade while pursuing her long term goal: to establish a network of teachers exchanging ideas, tasks and Learning Center methods, with the ultimate aim of improving teaching and learning in the school. Given the history of this school, these were very difficult goals.

She decided to write down her goals so that she would stay on task herself and not be diverted. She also decided to communicate with the school administration so that they would know what she was doing and be available for needed human and material support. She met with the District Coordinator to influence district wide staff development plans so that they would reflect a greater sensitivity to teacher needs. Lastly, the specialist was able to get the district to change its policy from a suggested use of Learning Centers to an attempt to use them. This change, she thought, might encourage more teachers interested in developing Learning Centers to try them, while forestalling a mandate which could be detrimental to the whole effort.

Initially, the specialist singled out Mrs. B as a focus for her efforts. She was well respected in the school yet, at the same time, the most negative about Learning Centers. The specialist reasoned that if she could convince her the word would spread. (It was clearly a calculated risk.) Mrs. B was regarded as a leader among the first grade teachers. She talked to everyone and was very frank and outspoken. She used the whole-class method, and at workshops on the use of Learning Centers, had already stated that it would not work with her students. At a Board of Education meeting she had publically chastised a person for trying to impose Learning Centers on her and her colleagues.

What the Specialist Did

The specialist used her understanding and knowledge of adult

development to help her plan an approach. She knew Mrs. B and how she taught, as well as her knowledge, capabilities and experience. She knew that Mrs.B would have to be in charge if she was going to try anything new. Mrs. B., fortunately, regarded the specialist as both colleague and friend - one who could be trusted.

The specialist listened to the story of Mrs. B's battle with the Board of Education. The specialist agreed with her that Mrs. B's concept of Learning Centers would not work. (She had some erroneous notion that it was only for gifted, well behaved students.) The specialist answered her questions and began to elaborate on the benefits of centers in the classroom. Mrs. B. was selected to be involved in a team teaching situation. Class size was to be reduced and she was to team with another teacher. (She was to have 15 students and two teachers to a class.) The specialist seized the opportunity to involve Mrs. B in a series of workshops on," How to Effectively Team Teach". She was, therefore, immediately put in a leadership position relative to her colleagues. The specialist kept stressing that they were in a good position to use this opportunity to try new ideas and teaching strategies. After three team meetings Mrs. B. asked the specialist to explain to her, and to the other first grade teachers, about Learning Centers.

She finally asked her team mate if she would be interested in giving the Learning Center idea a try. The specialist worked with the two of them on a steady basis for almost a month. She worked with them twice a week during lunch, prep periods and class. She taught them how to select a topic, what materials to use, how to make the materials, purchase supplies, set it up, etc.

What Happened as a Result?

Mrs. B. became actively involved in the use of Centers in her classroom She invited the principal into her room and he publicly complimented her.

Follow up meetings were held, during common prep times arranged by the administration, in Mrs. B's classroom.

The Impact

The specialist's success was dramatically illustrated when Mrs. B both thanked her and blamed her in the same breath - blame, for having allowed her to deprive her students of learning opportunities for so long, and thanks, for bringing back to her, after fourteen years, the excitement of teaching. Mrs. B's leadership, both direct and by example, led the other teachers to try the Learning Centers - with both the specialist and Mrs. B providing the technical and personal support necessary for implementing this district wide initiative.

Vignette Themes

These two vignettes, paraphrased here from the originals, and the fourteen others we collected (all written by the specialists themselves), bring us closer to a more complete view of the quality of the specialists work over time. They reveal a depth and breadth that adds an important dimension to our description of their professional practices as they work in schools, as well as giving us another viable source for data on the impact of these new leadership roles. Several themes illustrate this point. They are:

* survival skills
* technical skills
* pedagogical alternatives
* new curricular initiatives
* enhanced self esteem
* greater sense of professionalism
* demonstrated collegiality
* support among teachers
* increased holding power for new teachers

Although our original intent was to use this method solely to further document the direct impact of the specialists on teachers, in terms of their understanding and use of new teaching strategies and materials, we found that the vignettes exceeded our expectations. Their dramatic descriptions, dealing with tough problems in difficult environments, also documented teachers' gains in security and confidence, willingness to take initiative and feelings of enhanced professionalism.

We were made aware of their impact on the school as a whole by having the specialists views of getting groups of teachers to work with one another - exchange lesson plans, introduce and implement new programs and practices - and the effects of these interactions on the climate of the school and , in some cases, the building of new norms of colleagueship. The descriptions of the activities in the Teacher Centers showed its powerful role in attracting teachers, who came to work, to talk, to give and get help and to interact in new and different ways.

The vignette, then, appears to hold real promise as a tool for collecting data. It's power and value lies in the subtleties and nuances of character and organizational detail that only an insider, living the events as they unfold over time, can be aware of and express. It helps the readers (researchers, project directors, district personnel, etc.) get closer to capturing and understanding the dailiness and complexity of practice, as it helps the writers, the specialists themselves, by making them more self concious and aware of their roles and impact on the school community.

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